

Francisco Urena

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Good Morning members of this field hearing on Veterans Benefits. Senator Scott Brown, Others.

My name is Francisco A. Urena, I am the Commissioner of Veterans Services for the City of Boston. I would first like to thank you for allowing me the opportunity to participate in this hearing. In my job capacity as veterans' agent over the past five years, I often deal with assisting veterans in filing compensation for service connected disabilities and pensions. In a time when we are experiencing so many recently deployed veterans returning home, we as veteran's agents are seeing a high number of claims being sought. Not only from veterans who have been discharged post 9/11, but also from many WWII, Korean, Vietnam, Gulf War and peacetime veterans who through outreach have become aware of their benefits or are now engaging in conversation for the process of compensation. It has been my experience that the Dept. of VA has been proactive in solving veteran's claims for compensations under the leadership of Secretary Eric Shinseky. One example is the changes made to the previous compensation form which was a lengthy 26 page document. The new form adopted by the Department of Veterans affairs last year is now a 6 page user friendly form. This has allowed more veterans to begin and complete the easier process often on their own to file for compensation.

In my capacity as Veterans Agent, I have always recommended veterans with interest of filing a claim to seek help from an experienced advocate. Many first-time veterans seeking compensation who are denied often give up on the filing process after such denial. As opposed to the rest of the country, here in Massachusetts, Veterans have an advantage when it comes to filing compensation as well as seeking information and services. As well as leading the nation in the most generous veteran's assistance program, state law requires that every within that city, or town. Aside from advocates of non-profit veterans organization to include but not limit, the DAV, AmVets, VFW, American Legion, Order of the Purple Heart just to name a few, veteran seeking compensation have many options of agents willing and able to help them file a claim on their behalf.

In the City of Boston we are very fortunate to have the VA regional office located adjacent to City Hall plaza where veterans/claimants can seek first class assistance in filing a claim.

From my experience, I have always had a good turnaround with the compensation claims for the many of dozens of claims I have filed on behalf of veterans and widows' of veterans. I have often advised veterans that filing a claim is much like taking a case to court, not only do you have to have an issue but you have the evidence or proof of such issue. The proof in the case of a compensation claims comes in the ongoing or something that occurred years past, the lack of medical evidence or partially filed forms is what delays claims from being processed in a timely fashion.

While I've had success in assisting claimants in the process of obtaining compensation, there is room for improvement. One immediate area that I recommend intervention is the appeals

process. During the stage after the initial denial, veterans who often file the documents on their own, lacking the complete forms or supporting medical evidence of their claims often find themselves waiting several months or years waiting on the overwhelmed board of appeals to see their claim through.

In closing, I would like to note other changes which I have found helpful to us as agents in the process of claims and compensation. Such positive changes include, frequent written communication from the VA information, extended hours on the toll free customer service line, an improved customer service experience over the phone, as well as accurate waiting time, and call back feature where now one does not have to be tied to the phone for an extended period of time waiting on a VA representative.

We must do more to continue to assist these men and women who are returning home or have been home and are now part of our communities to get them the benefits they deserve.

I would like to thank you all once again for the opportunity to participate in this forum.